

R 110500Z FEB 09
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1077
INFO MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
ASIAN PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION
AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK

UNCLAS VLADIVOSTOK 000012

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: DCM DONS A YARMULKE IN BIROBIDJAN

¶1. A highlight of DCM Eric Rubin's trip to the Russian Far East was a February 5 visit to the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast (JAO), Birobidjan. The Jewish Autonomous Region was established in May 1934 as a homeland for Soviet Jews. It was a social experiment that some historians contend was doomed or even designed to fail. Though remote (5,000 miles from Moscow), under-funded, and ultimately subject to harsh communist repression, the city and its Jewish culture and religion have nevertheless survived, and may be enjoying the best period in the Oblast's almost 75 year history.

¶2. The town initially struggled to attract Jews and many who did come to Birobidjan, from Russia and from abroad, left disillusioned. The joke in Soviet times was that the JAO was neither Jewish nor autonomous, with Jews outnumbered by Poles, Ukrainians, and even indigenous people. But Birobidjan served Moscow's purpose in securing another outpost along Russia's thinly populated border with China, and as a Soviet propaganda ploy to show the world that socialism was inclusive and tolerant of all faiths. Today's Birobidjan is a mixture of that tragic legacy and a much more hopeful future.

¶3. Ironically, for a city that suffered more than most from Stalin, officialdom there maintains many of the Soviet trappings. The DCM's meetings were well-choreographed set pieces and the lavish lunch was an over-the-top, old fashioned round of toasts with too much vodka. On a visit to the synagogue and Jewish culture center, officials even took pains to explain that the renaissance of Jewish culture was real and "not just for show." To be fair, the Mayor was out of town and the US delegation was met by a Deputy who stuck to his notes during the formal meeting. Afterwards, however, officials were quite open about Stalin's legacy, pointing out in the City Hall portrait gallery which city founders were purged in the 1930's. Many officials only lasted six months before being executed. Beneath the clunky Soviet facade, Birobidjan's officials are welcoming and open once the formalities are done with. The Governor's office welcomed contact and partnerships with American educational institutions, cultural groups, and businesses. Officials noted that Birobidjan is processing timber into products that could be exported directly to the US, saving the cost of shipping raw timber for processing in China, which stocks many American furniture store shelves with finished goods.

¶4. The JAO has a population of 180,000 and with a huge nature preserve just north of Birobidjan, the region has a rural and small town feel. Light industry and agriculture are the bases of the economy. So far, the global economic crisis has not been as keenly felt here as elsewhere in the region. Along with the furniture factories are textile plants, a university with 2,000 students, and a growing service sector. The JAO budget is a healthy 4.5 billion rubles. Birobidjan is a city with a quality of life rich enough to actually attract new residents to a city in a region of decreasing population. Many pensioners prefer the JAO's milder climate, clean air and water, and "stable" (less corrupt) political situation.

¶5. The 5,000 Jews of the JAO make up only about two and a half percent of the Oblast population, but Yiddish is everywhere in Birobidjan, albeit more for cultural and historical pride than as a working language. In Birobidjan itself, the Jewish percentage is six percent, with about 2,000 people being active in the life of the synagogue and community center. There are

anecdotal reports that some elderly people are returning to Birobidjan from Germany and Israel, but not enough to make a statistical impact so far.

In addition to teaching the language, the cultural center's school also includes the study of Jewish culture, history, and music. The center arranges popular cultural exhibits to villages and small settlements in the JAO, and tourists come from Khabarovsk to visit the center on a regular basis. Jewish leaders were justifiably proud of the vitality of the synagogue and their wide contacts with Jews around the world who have sent contributions and visiting delegations to the "Zion of Russia." The Jewish Cultural Center "Freyd" and the synagogue are funded by a variety of Russian and international partners from government and private sources. In 2009, the JAO Administration promises to provide buses, vacation outings, and dances for the center's school children. The center continues to provide assistance to needy pensioners with free breakfasts and lunches.

The head of the center underlined that there are no nationalist conflicts in JAO. The synagogue is located close to the Orthodox Church and the two faiths enjoy good relations, celebrating some public holidays together. This September a festival of Jewish culture will mark the 75-year anniversary of the JAO's foundation and organizers said that a US delegation would be very welcome. The synagogue and cultural center are keeping a small but steady flame of Jewish life and identity alight.

16. Today's Birobidjan features clean streets, tree lined parks, and several furniture factories. The town is surrounded by a nature preserve the size of Belgium that features many endangered species and even a tiger in recent years. At the Far Eastern State Academy for Humanities and Social Studies the Vice-President for research explained that the institute provides 63 different educational programs for 2000 students. The Academy has good contacts with the universities in Israel which help with teaching materials, books in Yiddish, and summer schools for students. In the past cooperation with US Universities was more active and fruitful than now, and currently they have the only one US teacher. The Academy administration stressed that they want to re-establish such an interaction since interest in the English language continues to grow. Birobidjan has sister city relationships with Beaverton, Oregon; Niigata, Japan, several Israeli towns, and Hygan, China. Three checkpoints line JAO's 530 kilometer border with China.

17. Comment: The Consulate has long been impressed with the level of English from Birobidjan students and will try to provide additional English language programming to the university. Students were enthusiastic about the DCM's speech on President Obama and the future of US-Russian relations and they would benefit from more information about US educational opportunities and programs like FLEX, IREX and Summer Work and Travel. Birobidjan is a major cultural and environmental center in the Far East and well worth including in Khabarovsk programs as it is only a few hours to the West from there. The DCM's February 2-6 Vladivostok and Khabarovsk events and meetings to follow septel.

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